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FOR DS/OSAC, DS/IP/WHA AND RSO MEXICO CITY

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SUBJECT: 2009 MONTERREY OSAC CRIME AND SAFETY REPORT

REF: 08 STATE 168473

II. (U) OVERALL CRIME AND SAFETY SITUATION:

The year 2008 has seen a marked and worrisome increase in the overall level and brazen nature of violence throughout northeastern Mexico. The American Consulate General in Monterrey covers five states in northern Mexico: Nuevo Leon, San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas, Coahuila and Durango. The geographical distances, lack of accurate local reporting, and inherent security concerns for travel, combine to make it extremely difficult to discern a clear picture of what is going in some areas of the consular district. Conservative estimates place the countrywide 2008 narco-trafficking related death toll at about 6,000. This is a significant up-tick from a death toll of approximately 2,500 in 2007. On October 11, 2008, Organized Crime (OC) elements carried the fight to the doorsteps of the U.S. Government by lobbing an unexploded hand grenade and firing small arms against the US Consulate in Monterrey. Federal, state and local law enforcement responded quickly and forcefully to the incident but have yet to make any arrests in the case. OC elements and drug cartels continue to attack and harass law enforcement institutions at all levels of the Mexican government, hampering its goals to stabilize the region.

While proactive efforts against the cartels are ongoing, these policies are often stymied due to corruption at different levels of government. The arrest of several high level Mexican law enforcement officials during 2008, including the Mexican director of Interpol, highlights this point. Those that do not cave in to cartel influence are seen as obstacles and removed from the equation, as was the case in July 2008 with assassinations of the Federal Police Chief and his Deputy who were in charge of Monterrey airport security. In the recent past, the violence targeted members of drug trafficking organizations and Mexican law enforcement officials. However the cartels have shown few qualms in targeting rival cartel family members and risking the lives of innocent bystanders. In November 2008, the Mexican military conducted a raid at a local warehouse; the cartels rapidly responded with a series of random shootings around the city of Monterrey, designed to distract and pull the military off its objective. Although no one was killed or injured, this action placed an incalculable number of civilians at risk.

There is no evidence to indicate that criminals are specifically targeting U.S. citizens. However, foreign visitors (including Americans) have been among the victims of homicides and kidnappings in the nearby border region; a US passport does not act as a shield against crimes of opportunity or random violence. The December 2008 kidnapping of a U.S. citizen in Saltillo, Coahuila and the sub-par efforts by local law enforcement to solve the crime, are of particular concern (see III.C below).

IA. Crime Threats

Still fairly uncommon, carjackings in Monterrey dropped slightly for 2008. Vehicle theft numbers increased again as did thefts from vehicles. Most vehicle break-ins were due to valuables being left in plain sight in parked vehicles.

Home invasion robberies are rare in Monterrey but residential

burglaries are common, especially around the holidays when many homes are left vacant by vacationing families. Centrally-monitored residential alarms are strongly encouraged.

The level of bank robberies also remained about the same for 2008 along with several reports of robberies at automated teller machines. Visitors are encouraged to avoid using ATM bank machines in dark or isolated areas.

Visitors are very vulnerable when visiting local "red-light districts," particularly if they are departing alone in the early hours of the morning. Use caution and common sense when visiting any foreign country.

IB. Safety and Road Conditions

If traveling by road, travelers should exercise caution at all times and avoid traveling at night whenever possible. Drivers on extended road trips, such as those driving to the interior of Mexico from the U.S., should make sure to get adequate rest. Several Americans are killed each year in Monterrey's consular district in accidents involving driver fatigue. Travelers are encouraged to use toll ("cuota") roads rather than the less secure "free" ("libre") roads where available. It's recommended to travel with at least half a tank of gasoline when traveling in more remote areas. In addition, travelers should not hitchhike or offer rides to strangers anywhere in Mexico. Tourists should not hike alone in backcountry areas, nor walk alone on lightly frequented trails.

If stranded on the highway due to vehicle malfunction, dial 078 for roadside assistance. This service is provided free of charge by Mexico's Department of Tourism to all road travelers. More information on the services offered can be found on their website:

http://www.sectur.gob.mx/wb2/sectur/sect_9453_angoles_verdes

III. (U) POLITICAL VIOLENCE:

IA. Historical Perspective

American interests in Monterrey are generally not targets of political violence. There is no history of American businesses being targeted by demonstrators.

IB. Demonstrations

Small peaceful demonstrations occur at the U.S. Consulate periodically without incident.

IC. Terrorism

The threat from international terrorist groups is low.

ID. Civil Unrest

Large scale public demonstrations or strikes are rare in Monterrey. It is recommended that travelers avoid demonstrations and other activities that might be deemed political by the Mexican authorities. The Mexican Constitution prohibits political activities by foreigners, and such actions may result in detention and/or deportation.

III. (U) POST-SPECIFIC CONCERNS:

IA. Earthquakes and Floods

Monterrey is prone to flash floods during the hurricane season. It is common for streets to flood and for parts of the city to be completely cut-off from other areas during periods of heavy rains. Avoid driving or walking in flooded areas. Every year in Monterrey, a number of deaths are attributed to pedestrians or vehicles being swept away by rushing water in flooded areas.

Monterrey is not prone to earthquakes.

IB. Industrial and Transportation Accidents

Industrial accidents are always a concern in highly-industrialized areas of the city and along rail lines. The state of Nuevo Leon has a highly-trained team (Proteccion Civil) that can handle most industrial accidents, including Hazmat spills.

Transportation accidents are very common along the highways leading to and from the city and are often due to aggressive driving behavior. Monterrey sits on one of the busiest transportation corridors in Mexico and many of the highways are crowded with trucks laden with cargo.

I.C. Kidnappings

In prior reporting, kidnap for ransom crimes had been viewed as relatively rare in the Monterrey region. This trend is changing and the area has witnessed a significant rise in kidnappings during 2008. Since most kidnappings are not reported to local authorities and are handled directly by the victim's family or an intermediary, it is almost impossible to determine an accurate number of actual abductions. OSAC Monterrey strongly recommends that local authorities be contacted immediately to help resolve a kidnapping matter. While traditional kidnapping cases are not as pervasive in Monterrey when compared to other hot spots, the threat is very real in all parts of Mexico and should not be taken for granted. Drug-related kidnappings, commonly called "levantones", increased again in 2008 in the Monterrey area. Unfortunately, few of these cases have positive outcomes and the victims are seldom found alive, if found at all.

Local law enforcement has noted a changing trend in the type or caliber of kidnapping victims. Kidnapping gangs began targeting mid-level Mexican business executives and entrepreneurs who could not afford elaborate security measures and would demand a reduced ransom, commensurate with the perceived victim's status.

Some analysts in Nuevo Leon stated unofficially there were 127 reported kidnappings in 2008. They further advised that local law enforcement received about two to three criminal complaints per day for "levantones" or drug debt related abductions.

The U.S. Consulate General Monterrey was apprised of twelve kidnappings of US citizens in the last half of 2008. Of those twelve, the status of four victims remains undetermined at this time. One of the most significant kidnappings for 2008 involved the abduction of a US businessman and anti-kidnapping consultant, who was conducting training in Saltillo, Coahuila. The victim was taken on December 10, 2008 outside of a well known restaurant while providing assistance to the family of a Mexican kidnapping victim, who is also a fellow security expert.

The ensuing Coahuila investigative response could be described as inadequate at best. (Per Mexican law, this case has not been classified as a kidnapping and as such there is no requirement by the state attorney general or police to investigate his disappearance.) At worst, they consciously elected to not vigorously pursue the investigation. Up to this point, no ransom demands have been received.

Virtual kidnapping continues to be a common theme. Extortionists call prospective victims on the telephone, posing as kidnappers, and demand payments in return for the release of an allegedly detained family member, usually a child. Persons receiving such calls should be extremely skeptical; most such demands or threats are baseless. Persons receiving such calls should contact the local police immediately by dialing 066.

I.D. Drugs and Narco-Terrorism

Narco-terrorism related violence continues to dominate much of the surrounding area. In the wake of the 2007 bloody, public battles between rival cartel factions for dominance, a tenuous truce has held for most of 2008 in Monterrey. Mexican military and federal police elements continue to lead the charge in furthering the "Not one step back" mandate of Mexican President Calderon. As a result of this hard line stance, Mexican federal authorities are often subjects of reprisals by the cartels. Numerous soldiers and police have suffered brutal deaths at the hands of cartel enforcers during 2008 for their actions in the

drug war. In October 2008, nine Mexican Army soldiers were captured, tortured and murdered by Cartels as a direct response to prior Mexican military counter-narcotics actions. Cartels also began adopting grotesque terror tactics from other parts of the world such as beheadings. There are additional concerns as to what other extraterritorial terror tactics may migrate into Mexico.

IV. (U) POLICE RESPONSE:

Police response and professionalism varies widely depending on the municipality in the Monterrey metropolitan area. Some police departments, such as the San Pedro Police in Monterrey, are well-trained, well-paid, and professional while police departments in other areas may not be as efficient or responsive. Police response can vary widely depending on the type of emergency and area.

Police corruption, as widely reported by the media, continues to be a problem. Be aware that offering a bribe to a public official to avoid a traffic fine or other penalty is a crime in Mexico.

Although police services may not be equal to those in the U.S., visitors are strongly encouraged to contact the police in an emergency (066). U.S. citizens are advised to cooperate with the police if stopped or questioned. For information regarding assistance for American citizens who become victims of a crime, please contact the American Citizen Services office at (81) 8342-8506.

V. (U) MEDICAL EMERGENCIES:

Monterrey has adequate medical facilities. Facilities outside of the metropolitan area are more limited. In an emergency, dial 066 or 065 for an ambulance. Wait times for ambulances can vary greatly. Permanent residents in Monterrey are encouraged to contract a private ambulance service in order to ensure prompt service.

The hospitals used more frequently by Consulate staff are:

San Jose Hospital Av. Morones Prieto No. 3000 PTE Monterrey, N.L. 64710	8347-1011
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Hospital Santa Engracia Av. Frida Kahlo #180 San Pedro Garza Garcia, N.L. 66260	8368-7788
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VI. (U) TRAVEL PRECAUTIONS:

Although Monterrey is reported to have lower non-drug related crime rates than other Mexican cities, visitors are urged to remain vigilant and use common sense during their stay. Travelers should leave valuables and irreplaceable items in a safe place or at home. All visitors are encouraged to make use of hotel safes where available, avoid wearing expensive jewelry, and carry only the cash or credit cards that will be needed on each outing.

Because of the increased threat of narco-related violence and crime, from time to time the US Consulate Monterrey limits travel of its employees to the states of Durango and the southern two thirds of Coahuila. When this happens, notices will be sent by the consulates or Embassy and posted on the web indicating the nature of the concern and the expected time period for which the restriction would remain in place.

Visitors should be aware of their surroundings at all times, even when in areas generally considered safe. Use of street or gypsy taxis is strongly discouraged. Visitors are recommended utilize radio taxis or hotel transportation services. Women traveling alone are especially vulnerable and should exercise caution, particularly at night. Victims, who are almost always unaccompanied, have been raped, robbed of personal property, or abducted and then held while their credit cards were used at various businesses and Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs). U.S.

citizens should be very cautious in general when using ATMs in Mexico. If an ATM must be used, it should be accessed only during the business day at large protected facilities (preferably inside commercial establishments, rather than at glass-enclosed, highly visible ATMs on streets). U.S. and Mexican citizens are sometimes accosted on the street and forced to withdraw money from their accounts using their ATM cards.

VII. (U) HOW TO CONTACT THE CONSULATE:

U.S. Consulate General Monterrey (81) 8047-3100
Av Constitucion #411 PTE
Monterrey, N.L. 64006

After hours, American Citizens needing emergency assistance from the Consulate may call the duty officer at 81-8362-9126.

VIII. (U) OSAC COUNTRY COUNCIL:

Monterrey has an active OSAC Council. POC is RSO Michael A. Murphy, murphyma@state.gov, 52 81 8047-3100 ext. 3281.

WILLIAMSON